

The Soft American

By President-Elect John F. Kennedy

December 26, 1960

Sports Illustrated

Beginning more than 2,500 years ago, from all quarters of the Greek world men thronged every four years to the sacred grove of Olympia, under the shadow of Mount Cronus, to compete in the most famous athletic contests of history—the Olympian games.

During the contest a sacred truce was observed among all the states of Greece as the best athletes of the Western world competed in boxing and foot races, wrestling and chariot races for the wreath of wild olive which was the prize of victory. When the winners returned to their home cities to lay the Olympian crowns in the chief temples they were greeted as heroes and received rich rewards. For the Greeks prized physical excellence and athletic skills among man's great goals and among the prime foundations of a vigorous state.

Thus the same civilizations which produced some of our highest achievements of philosophy and drama, government and art, also gave us a belief in the importance of physical soundness which has become a part of Western tradition; from the *mens sana in corpore sano* of the Romans to the British belief that the playing fields of Eton brought victory on the battlefields of Europe. This knowledge, the knowledge that the physical well-being of the citizen is an important foundation for the vigor and vitality of all the activities of the nation, is as old as Western civilization itself. But it is a knowledge which today, in America, we are in danger of forgetting.

The first indication of a decline in the physical strength and ability of young Americans became apparent among United States soldiers in the early stages of the Korean War. The second came when figures were released showing that almost one out of every two young Americans was being rejected by Selective Service as mentally, morally or physically unfit. But the most startling demonstration of the general physical decline of American youth came when Dr. Hans Kraus and Dr. Sonja Weber revealed the results of 15 years of research centering in the Posture Clinic of New York's Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital—results of physical fitness tests given to 4,264 children in this country and 2,870 children in Austria, Italy and Switzerland.

The findings showed that despite our unparalleled standard of living, despite our good food and our many playgrounds, despite our emphasis on school athletics, American youth lagged far behind Europeans in physical fitness. Six tests for muscular strength and flexibility were given; 57.9% of the American children failed one or more of these tests, while only 8.7% of the European youngsters failed.

A CONSISTENT DECLINE

Especially disheartening were the results of the five strength tests: 35.7% of American children failed one or more of these, while only 1.1% of the Europeans failed, and among Austrian and Swiss youth the rate of failure was as low as .5%.

As a result of the alarming Kraus-Weber findings President Eisenhower created a Council on Youth Fitness at the Cabinet level and appointed a Citizens Advisory Committee on the Fitness of American Youth, composed of prominent citizens interested in fitness. Over the past five years the physical fitness of American youth has

been discussed in forums, by committees and in leading publications. A 10-point program for physical fitness has been publicized and promoted. Our schools have been urged to give increased attention to the physical well-being of their students. Yet there has been no noticeable improvement. Physical fitness tests conducted last year in Britain and Japan showed that the youth of those countries were considerably more fit than our own children. And the annual physical fitness tests for freshmen at Yale University show a consistent decline in the prowess of young Americans; 51% of the class of 1951 passed these tests, 43% of the class of 1956 passed, and only 38%, a little more than a third, of the class of 1960 succeeded in passing the not overly rigorous examination.

Of course, physical tests are not infallible. They can distort the true health picture. There are undoubtedly many American youths and adults whose physical fitness matches and exceeds the best of other lands.

But the harsh fact of the matter is that there is also an increasingly large number of young Americans who are neglecting their bodies—whose physical fitness is not what it should be—who are getting soft. And such softness on the part of individual citizens can help to strip and destroy the vitality of a nation.

For the physical vigor of our citizens is one of America's most precious resources. If we waste and neglect this resource, if we allow it to dwindle and grow soft then we will destroy much of our ability to meet the great and vital challenges which confront our people. We will be unable to realize our full potential as a nation.

Throughout our history we have been challenged to armed conflict by nations which sought to destroy our independence or threatened our freedom. The young men of America have risen to those occasions, giving themselves freely to the rigors and hardships of warfare. But the stamina and strength which the defense of liberty requires are not the product of a few weeks' basic training or a month's conditioning. These only come from bodies which have been conditioned by a lifetime of participation in sports and interest in physical activity. Our struggles against aggressors throughout our history have been won on the playgrounds and corner lots and fields of America.

Thus, in a very real and immediate sense, our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to our security.

However, we do not, like the ancient Spartans, wish to train the bodies of our youths merely to make them more effective warriors. It is our profound hope and expectation that Americans will never again have to expend their strength in armed conflict.

But physical fitness is as vital to the activities of peace as to those of war, especially when our success in those activities may well determine the future of freedom in the years to come. We face in the Soviet Union a powerful and implacable adversary determined to show the world that only the Communist system possesses the vigor and determination necessary to satisfy awakening aspirations for progress and the elimination of poverty and want. To meet the challenge of this enemy will require determination and will and effort on the part of all Americans. Only if our citizens are physically fit will they be fully capable of such an effort.

For physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body; it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity. The relationship between the soundness of the body and the activities of the mind is subtle and complex. Much is not yet understood. But we do know what the Greeks knew: that intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity when the body is healthy and strong; that hardy spirits and tough minds usually inhabit sound bodies.

In this sense, physical fitness is the basis of all the activities of our society. And if our bodies grow soft and inactive, if we fail to encourage physical development and prowess, we will undermine our capacity for

thought, for work and for the use of those skills vital to an expanding and complex America.

Thus the physical fitness of our citizens is a vital prerequisite to America's realization of its full potential as a nation, and to the opportunity of each individual citizen to make full and fruitful use of his capacities.

It is ironic that at a time when the magnitude of our dangers makes the physical fitness of our citizens a matter of increasing importance, it takes greater effort and determination than ever before to build the strength of our bodies. The age of leisure and abundance can destroy vigor and muscle tone as effortlessly as it can gain time. Today human activity, the labor of the human body, is rapidly being engineered out of working life. By the 1970s, according to many economists, the man who works with his hands will be almost extinct.

Many of the routine physical activities which earlier Americans took for granted are no longer part of our daily life. A single look at the packed parking lot of the average high school will tell us what has happened to the traditional hike to school that helped to build young bodies. The television set, the movies and the myriad conveniences and distractions of modern life all lure our young people away from the strenuous physical activity that is the basis of fitness in youth and in later life.

NOW IT IS TIME

Of course, modern advances and increasing leisure can add greatly to the comfort and enjoyment of life. But they must not be confused with indolence, with, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, "slothful ease," with an increasing deterioration of our physical strength. For the strength of our youth and the fitness of our adults are among our most important assets, and this growing decline is a matter of urgent concern to thoughtful Americans.

This is a national problem, and requires national action. President Eisenhower helped show the way through his own interest and by calling national attention to our deteriorating standards of physical fitness. Now it is time for the United States to move forward with a national program to improve the fitness of all Americans.

FIRST: We must establish a White House Committee on Health and Fitness to formulate and carry out a program to improve the physical condition of the nation. This committee will include the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare and the Secretary of the Interior. The executive order creating the committee will clearly state its purpose, and coordinate its activities with the many federal programs which bear a direct relation to the problem of physical fitness.

SECOND: The physical fitness of our youth should be made the direct responsibility of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. This department should conduct—through its Office of Education and the National Institutes of Health—research into the development of a physical fitness program for the nation's public schools. The results of this research shall be made freely available to all who are interested. In addition, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare should use all its existing facilities to attack the lack of youth fitness as a major health problem.

THIRD: The governor of each state will be invited to attend an annual National Youth Fitness Congress. This congress will examine the progress which has been made in physical fitness during the preceding year, exchange suggestions for improving existing programs and provide an opportunity to encourage the states to implement the physical fitness program drawn up by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Our states are anxious to participate in such programs, to make sure that their youth have the opportunity for full development of their bodies as well as their minds.

FOURTH: The President and all departments of government must make it clearly understood that the promotion of sports participation and physical fitness is a basic and continuing policy of the United States. By providing such leadership, by keeping physical fitness in the forefront of the nation's concerns, the federal government can make a substantial contribution toward improving the health and vigor of our citizens.

But no matter how vigorous the leadership of government, we can fully restore the physical soundness of our nation only if every American is willing to assume responsibility for his own fitness and the fitness of his children. We do not live in a regimented society where men are forced to live their lives in the interest of the state. We are, all of us, as free to direct the activities of our bodies as we are to pursue the objects of our thought. But if we are to retain this freedom, for ourselves and for generations yet to come, then we must also be willing to work for the physical toughness on which the courage and intelligence and skill of man so largely depend.

All of us must consider our own responsibilities for the physical vigor of our children and of the young men and women of our community. We do not want our children to become a generation of spectators. Rather, we want each of them to be a participant in the vigorous life.

Sources:

- <https://www.si.com/vault/issue/43278/15>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20121107011430/http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1134750/index.htm>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20121106095148/http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1134750/2/index.htm>
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20121107111228/http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1134750/3/index.htm>